

INCIDENCE OF VENEREAL DISEASE IN ITALY*

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Before the new law on venereal prophylaxis came into force, the notification of syphilis and other venereal diseases was not compulsory and their incidence was estimated from the records of the public clinics.

However, because of the large number of such sources that could be included in the estimate (about 1,200: of which 207 are municipal clinics, 225 clinics belonging to the National Society for Mothers and Children, and 600 sickness benefit offices), and because these establishments are mainly used by the very persons who are most exposed to infection (those of low social class with poor standards of hygiene), it may be assumed that the data so collected embraced very nearly all new cases of infection.

Moreover, since these data may easily be compared with those of previous years, a fairly exact idea may be gained of epidemiological trends in treponemal infection and other venereal diseases.

It is estimated that the total notifications of 33,720 cases of primary and secondary syphilis in 1939 had fallen to 17,001 in 1947. This decline in syphilis incidence continued more and more steeply during the following years throughout the whole country, so that in 15 years there was a fall of 93 per cent., from the 1939 total of 33,720 to 2,264 cases in 1954.

This decrease is the more remarkable in that there were only 248 clinics in 1939 as against 558 in 1954.

In 1955, however, 4,345 cases of primary and secondary syphilis were notified, 2,081 more than the previous year. This coincided with the introduction of a new system of recording which increased the sources of information from 558 to 800. This rise in the number of notified cases continued, though not so steeply, and 1956 showed an increase of 539 cases. The provisional figure of 4,375 for 1958 shows that the level remained more or less the same.

The number of notifications of cases of gonorrhoea

has fallen more slowly but very steadily. In 1939 there were 48,628, in 1947 45,887, in 1950 28,976, in 1957 17,769, and in 1958 16,519, a fall of nearly 66 per cent. in 20 years.

There has also been a marked and steady reduction in cases of soft chancre, 6,748 notifications in 1939 as against 1,103 in 1958, a fall of 83 per cent.

The results of a serological study of supposedly healthy volunteer blood donors in Rome in the years 1955 to 1957 may be used to supplement the data reported above.

41,675 serum samples were examined from healthy persons of both sexes, aged from 21 to 50 years, drawn from all social classes, and having no history or symptoms of syphilitic infection. The tests included the cardiolipin Wassermann reaction, Reiter protein complement-fixation test, Kahn test, and the V.D. R.L. test. In those giving positive results, the treponemal immobilization test of Nelson and Mayer was also performed. The total of sero-positive reactors was 1.4 per cent.

It is therefore apparent that the incidence of venereal infections has decreased greatly since 1939, except that syphilis notifications have risen slightly in the last 4 years—which may be due rather to more accurate recording than to an actual increase in the number of new cases. Venereal diseases no longer present a serious public health problem in Italy, but the persistence of certain reservoirs of infection, especially of syphilis, shows that the present organization for combatting venereal infection should not be allowed to lapse, and that our prophylactic measures should be energetically applied with the object of eradicating these diseases altogether. The most effective means of attaining this is to base anti-venereal prophylaxis on the new regulations which have recently been promulgated and to educate public opinion.

Diffusion des maladies vénériennes en Italie

Des données exposées ci-dessus il résulte que les contagions des maladies vénériennes en Italie ont constamment diminué de 1939 à 1958.

Seulement la syphilis a manifesté une légère augmentation des cas notifiés au cours de ces dernières années.

La question se pose de savoir s'il s'agit là d'une augmentation réelle, ou bien s'il faut, en partie, la rapporter à l'augmentation des sources de relève.

On peut conclure que les maladies vénériennes ne posent plus en Italie un problème sérieux de santé

publique. Cependant, la persistance de quelques foyers, particulièrement en ce qui concerne la syphilis, conseille non seulement de ne pas démonter l'organisation existant actuellement pour la lutte contre les maladies vénériennes, mais de perfectionner les méthodes prophylactiques dans le but d'en réaliser l'éradication.

Pour atteindre ce but, il semble que le moyen le plus efficace soit d'envisager la prophylaxie antivénérienne sur une base épidémiologique conformément aux dispositions de la nouvelle loi qui vient d'entrer en vigueur, et d'améliorer la conscience hygienique de la population à travers une oeuvre d'éducation sanitaire.

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